

NASAA Strategic Planning Regional Arts Organization Forum

January 30, 2017

As part of our comprehensive [strategic planning process](#), NASAA sought ideas, advice and suggestions from numerous colleague organizations beyond the state arts agency field. An important strand of this work included consultation with the nation's six [regional arts organizations](#) (RAOs). RAOs offer an important partnership perspective because they collaborate with both the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and state arts agencies on planning and program delivery. RAOs also offer a multidisciplinary, international perspective on the cultural landscape in which state arts agencies and NASAA operate.

Participants

The RAOs represented at the January forum were:

- Arts Midwest
- Mid America Arts Alliance
- Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation
- New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA)
- South Arts
- Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF)

To facilitate their work together, the RAOs engage a coordinator, Mary Margaret Schoenfeld, who is an ex officio member of NASAA's Board. She participated in the forum. NASAA CEO Pam Breaux and NASAA Chief Program and Planning Officer Kelly Barsdate co-facilitated the session.

Shared Policy Interests

The forum began by debriefing on current federal policy developments and shared policy objectives. Top-of-mind for all is sustaining support for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in an uncertain budgetary and political climate. The group recapped the NASAA board's policy objectives around promoting a strong federal agency and maintaining the current partnership allocation that devotes 40% of the NEA's grants budget to states and regions.

NASAA and the RAOs shared near-term actions steps that are being pursued to establish positive connections with the White House and ensure continuity of support in Congress. Both RAOs and NASAA agreed that foregrounding state connections with policy makers can be very influential. Among the regions, WESTAF is the only one that coordinates formal federal advocacy efforts among its members. WESTAF sponsors an annual forum through which advocacy delegates from the 13 western states visit Capitol Hill to encourage support for the arts. This year's forum is happening at an especially charged time, given recent headlines threatening the NEA's funding. NASAA underscored the need for a balanced, pan-partisan approach to advocacy to avoid polarizing our supporters in Congress.

Threats to State Arts Agencies

Given their close working relationships with states, NASAA asked RAO leaders to share their concerns regarding the future of state arts agencies. Challenges identified by the RAOs included:

- Decimated budgets
- Changes in the structure of state government that keep state arts agencies off-balance or limit their access to authority
- A divisive political climate
- Cutbacks in nonessential government services
- Appointees in key leadership positions requiring a high level of political management
- Paralysis
- State arts agencies are "in a defensive crouch"
- Irrelevance
- Thin personnel (some financial resources returned after the recession, but human resources did not)
- Legacy programs that hold state arts agencies back
- Lack of collaboration between state arts agencies and advocacy groups
- The original purpose of state arts agencies (creating a cultural infrastructure to provide arts access) is complete and no longer needed
- Running a state arts agency is a lousy job and the field does not have top talent
- Eroding public support for arts institutions
- Jurisdictional governments are experiencing acute budget chaos and, in some cases, corruption

Opportunities for State Arts Agencies

The regional arts organizations identified the following:

- If governors or legislatures want to make change, that's an opportunity that state arts agencies can seize.
- The need to partner across sectors offers the chance to strengthen the position of state arts agencies.
- Alliances with community foundations hold potential for states.
- The creative economy is a true advantage for states who need economic growth.
- Individual artist professional development programs offer good models for connecting with stakeholders in the entrepreneurship and small business sectors.
- Current political crises offer a way to channel advocacy energy and get more people involved.

NASAA's Strengths

Regional arts organizations noted several valuable NASAA attributes:

- Widely-respected research
- Customized assistance adapted to the needs of each state

- The high level of "hand holding" that NASAA offers is much appreciated by state arts agencies.
- NASAA is highly accessible to states.
- NASAA is very focused on the needs of state arts agencies.
- A palpable sense of community/family exists among NASAA members.
- People get a lot out of serving on the NASAA board.
- NASAA engenders a high level of loyalty and satisfaction.
- "50 happy members is a huge accomplishment."
- Good leadership synergies appear to be present among senior staff.

NASAA's Weaknesses

NASAA invited candid criticism regarding our limitations and things we could improve in the future. The regions offered the following:

- NASAA doesn't have enough relationships outside the state arts agency network.
- NASAA is insular.
- NASAA is too timid in pushing new ideas.
- NASAA spends too much time reinforcing old norms and outdated models.
- NASAA's power is "neutered" by its leadership structure. NASAA can't play on a national level with only state arts agencies as its stakeholders.
- States spend too much time "talking shop" at NASAA gatherings and not enough time talking about newer/bigger issues.
- Neither NASAA nor RAOs have exerted the advocacy power we have, given how influential our state connections are.
- NASAA is not viewed as an influential group and needs more reputation capital.
- It's not fair to SAAs that NASAA is so collaborative within the Cultural Advocacy Group (CAG). NASAA has "dealt away the power of the 40%." We are the most powerful people in the room, but we don't act like it.
- We're "nice to a fault."
- NASAA has "a nice board, but not the right board."

Suggestions for Future Work

NASAA asked the RAOs to answer the question, "What is the most strategic work NASAA can do in the future?" Suggestions included:

- Hands-on assistance (as with Kansas) will continue to be vital.
- NASAA needs to prepare states for crises. Apart from crisis prevention, state arts agencies need to know how to react situationally if they are threatened with elimination or negative press.
- Explore futures modeling. Are there two or three state arts agencies with which NASAA could model change and high-level learnings? What's generating partnerships? What's generating revenue?
- Public agencies are leaders in equity and inclusion practices, but that's not widely understood by private funders.
- Share models of state arts agency transformation.
- Keep promoting best practices and pushing the definition of what "best" is.

- NASAA needs to lead a true futures exercise to reinvent the model of how state arts agencies do business. State arts agencies are "not effective" now and they cannot focus on the mega/meta trends because they are too focused on survival.
- State arts agencies administer "too many exotic hamster cages of grant programs." Help them simplify.
- Changing state arts agency (or NEA) grant programs will necessitate leaving many organizations behind. What can states offer them that is of low cost but high value?
- The reinvention of state arts agencies will be deeply threatening to many agencies who are attached to the current status quo. NASAA needs to "be prepared to lose some members and alienate some states."
- Shape NEA funding to states and regions to support change and allow for room for the field to evolve to where it really needs to go.
- Encourage the NEA to change its state and regional adjudication system. The current ratings and scorings are not relevant.
- Consider a longer term approach to the New Executive Directors Boot Camp that "continues to work with newcomers over time." The people entering the field don't have state arts agency expertise and need help with advocacy and change management over a longer trajectory.
- NASAA needs to "clarify its convictions" about what we deeply want and what we're willing to sacrifice to get there, politically speaking. If it comes to a choice between saving the NEA and maintaining the 40%, what is NASAA's choice? In the 1990s NASAA's pivot on that position eroded trust and was a communications "fumble."
- In whose interest is it to have RAOs in the 40%? The NEA and state arts agencies value it, but why should Congress care?
- It's important to preserve the NEA no matter what. If it goes away, it's not coming back.
- NASAA needs to make state arts agencies "sexy."
- This moment in American politics highlights the need to engage everyone in democracy. State arts agencies can be effective vehicles for that.

Methodology Note

This report contains the full spectrum of viewpoints and observations asserted by individual regional arts organization executive directors. The forum did not require the individuals to arrive at a group consensus on all points.